

Ordination overhaul

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Yesterday, I heard some dismal new student recruitment statistics for a Presbyterian (USA) seminary. They weren't the first ones that I've heard. Admissions are low. Really low. Which doesn't make a whole lot of sense, considering we are in the midst of a recession. God's call on my life to go to seminary became loud and clear when I was in a horrible job. Shouldn't there be more people looking at seminary?

But then, if someone does any investigating in my denomination (PCUSA), they will know the obstacles. (Sorry for the denominational shop talk. I'd love to know if other denominations face similar issues.) I certainly let people know what they are in for when they tell me that they want to go. Many people have gone to seminary from churches I've served. I think that being a pastor is the best job in the world. But I do want people to be aware of what they're getting in to.

The truth is that it is very likely that you will go to seminary and never be able to get through the ordination process. I usually tell them my story. I graduated with great grades. I had been a Teacher's Aid, Tutor and Research Assistant in Systematic Theology, Church History, Greek, Hebrew, and Practical Theology. My internship went well. The church hired me when the internship was over, because they wanted me to continue in the position. I had wonderful recommendations. But I couldn't pass one of my Ordination Exams, so I couldn't look for a job.

People coached me. Professors couldn't find anything wrong with my exam. My Presbytery sent one of the exams back, arguing that I had actually passed it. My coaches kept saying, "Don't be smart. Don't be creative. Pretend like you're a retired Presbyterian elder. And *don't be creative!*"

I moved to Louisiana. My husband began serving a congregation. A small church, where I would make \$18K wanted me to be their pastor. I felt called there. A lay minister had served the congregation for 15 years, but they couldn't call me because I was stuck in the ordination system.

So, after \$40k of debt, three years of academic achievements, healthy psychological exams, and solid service to the church, I couldn't serve my denomination. I started looking at the UCC ordination system.

Finally, I made it through, but it entailed me being unemployed for about a year. My story is a common one. A very common one. And along with the shortage of job opportunities at the moment, I think these stories are having a devastating effect on seminary admissions.

The ordination exams are graded by pastors and lay people who don't know the candidate. The graders are rarely experts in the subject. Probably half of the graders wouldn't be able to pass the exams that they're grading. And they fail *a lot* of people. People from underrepresented racial ethnic communities are much more likely to fail the tests than white students.

This system may have made sense in a time when seminary debt was not so high, but we simply cannot expect people to go into horrendous debt and not be able to look for a call at the end of it.

"But, Carol, we care about who serves our congregations! We have high expectations," you might be thinking. But you would be wrong. About half of our churches are being served by lay people. Sometimes they're Commissioned Ruling Elders. Sometimes it's someone's Baptist uncle who's itching to steal the church out of our denomination.

We turn away qualified, educated candidates, based on blind tests by people who don't know them or the subject matter and allow our churches to be led by... just about anyone.

So what can we do, as churches, to help this situation? My wise friend, [Katie Mulligan](#), had a good suggestion. Why not front-load the process? Why not have students go through a psychological assessment before they go into seminary? Then, once they're in, they're in. If a major red flag comes up, then we should reconsider, but otherwise, we should help them through the process.

One more thing. I know that we have a shortage of positions available right now. But that won't be a long-term issue. I often refer to [this chart](#), which is about five years old. It shows us that only 25% of pastors will be serving in a few years. We have a glut of ministers now. But we need to think about preparing people for the future.